

Pruning Timber Trees

Tennessee Department of Agriculture, Division of Forestry

Pruning can be used to produce a valuable straight knot-free butt log, but it is worthwhile only with fast-growing, high-value species such as walnut and cherrybark oak growing on the best sites.

- Begin pruning at about age five.
- The best time to prune is in February or March.
- Never remove more than 1/3 of limbs or 1/2 of the crown.
- Don't cut opposite branches in the same year.
- Try to cut branches when they are less than two inches in diameter.
- Don't apply wound dressing.
- Leave the limb collar on the trunk but leave no stub. Note the branch bark ridge on top of the limb and the branch collar on the lower side of the limb. The cut should be made just outside of the branch ridge (on top of cut) and the collar (bottom of cut), so as to leave no stub, nor flush cut.
- Avoid tearing the bark when cutting larger limbs. Remove larger limbs by making three cuts:
 1. first cut on the bottom of the limb from underneath about 12 inches from the branch attachment (about on half way up through the limb),
 2. then cut down from the top of the limb about one inch from the under cut (also about half the way through),
 3. finally, cut just outside the branch bark ridge and the outer portion of the collar to remove the stub.
- If the amount of pruning needed to produce a suitable tree is just too drastic, it might be preferable to cut down the tree at 4 inches above the ground (at a 30 degree angle) and allow the best resulting stump sprout to form a new stem.
- Prune all limbs to a height of 17 feet.

When there are two leaders, leave the straightest one. If a leader is less than 45 degrees off vertical, it can be straightened by duct taping it toward an opposite limb (note: it will naturally tend to bend more toward the south).

If limbs of young trees begin to overlap, the stand needs to be thinned. Crowding cannot be corrected by pruning.